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SUBJECT: ICRC Maintains No Humanitarian Crisis in South Ossetia

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In Moscow February 5, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Russian Delegation officials stated that there is no humanitarian emergency in South Ossetia, despite reports of potential food shortages. Although there are some needs that continue to demand attention, such as conditions in collective centers and freedom of movement for the population residing near the Georgian border, these experts maintain that the crisis in South Ossetia is over. End Summary.

¶2. (U) In January Refcoord obtained two separate studies conducted by United Nations local implementing partners operating out of the Russian North Caucasus that examined the status of food security, education, and health care in South Ossetia. The issue of food security raised concerns of a potential humanitarian crisis in South Ossetia. A study funded by the World Food Program (WFP) indicated that due to the destruction of agricultural land, the rising cost of food, and low levels of employment in the disputed territory, there was a high likelihood of a food crisis during the winter and early spring of 2009.

¶3. (U) ICRC Russia Country Delegate Francois Bellon addressed these concerns in a meeting with us February 5. (Note: ICRC operates on the ground in South Ossetia, and has succeeded in accessing the area since the immediate aftermath of the August conflict. ICRC representatives have traveled throughout the region since last August, with Bellon's deputy Francois Blancy's most recent visit taking place the week of January 23. End Note.) Bellon reported that, although humanitarian problems persist, the region has moved on from crisis mode, and life-saving measures are no longer needed. Particularly in regard to food, the ICRC found that the prices and selection were similar to markets in Russia's North Caucasus. Indeed, South Ossetia's agricultural sector was not greatly disturbed by the August events.

¶4. (SBU) ICRC is not planning to embark on development projects in South Ossetia. Blancy described the disputed territory as "stones among mountains," in reference to its historic underprivileged and undeveloped status. Bellon referred to the works of Dutch artist Pieter Brueghel, who specialized in landscapes populated by peasants, in describing rural South Ossetia. The poor are still poor; the quality of life has not been greatly affected by the conflict. Planning for the region must take into consideration the population's lifestyle. Highly technical assistance may be a greater hindrance than help in the post-conflict recovery process. Furthermore, resources that cannot be absorbed by the economy encourage corrupt dealings and harmful misappropriation.

¶5. (SBU) On his January trip, Blancy visited Tskhinvali and Khetagorovo, a small (population approximately 800), predominantly ethnic-Ossetian village. He had previously visited the region in the fall. He found that conditions were more difficult in the region due to the winter and limited access to gas. However, he noted that the supply of electricity to the town is stable. Water supply is now relatively reliable in the capital, Tskhinvali. Schools and social institutions are also functioning. The outlook at the eight collective centers in the region is bleaker. There are approximately 600 IDPs in these shelters, though ICRC is working to improve quality of life there by distributing clothes, performing maintenance, and upgrading lavatories and kitchen facilities.

¶6. (SBU) Blancy and Bellon identified several remaining challenges: care of people in the IDP centers; support for people residing in villages destroyed in the August conflict; and assistance to people

living near the border with freedom of movement issues. The ICRC is considering establishing an office in the Leningori region or else sending a mobile team there regularly in order to assist residents cut off from their normal personal and business contacts in undisputed Georgian territory.

¶7. (SBU) ICRC has \$5.8 million for its mission in South Ossetia, which is its highest budget per capita in the world, and Bellon is not fully confident that his team will be able to spend all of the earmarked money. When approached in December by WFP Regional Director Daly Belgasmi, who wanted to discuss the possibility of shipping flour from Egypt to South Ossetia for relief, Bellon had responded by directing the visiting official to return to Cairo rather than provide aid not needed. Although Bellon said he would welcome the presence of other international organizations in South Ossetia -- particularly UNHCR to deal with protection issues, he averred that the ICRC is able to fill existing gaps on its own.

Comment

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¶7. (SBU) Getting aid to South Ossetia via UN agencies and NGO partners would present serious logistical and political challenges. Were ICRC to identify emergent humanitarian needs, the international community would face a dilemma that would test its commitment to donorship. Fortunately the ICRC states with certainty that we are not in that position.

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